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ABSTRACT

The ethnicity patterns and adaptive strategies of 10 economically successful Mexican Americans were studied over a 1-year period in San Jose, California. Employed by a federally-funded community development project, the 10 held positions from secretary to chief program administrator, with salaries ranging from $6,000 to $20,000 per year. A formal 4-hour interview was conducted with each informant to obtain data on family background, economic and occupational success and satisfaction, and ethnicity. Life histories were also collected from each individual. Degree of economic success was determined by combining various measures--level of occupational skills, present salary, present status within the organization, degree of job stability within the last year, degree of expressed job satisfaction, and degree of economic independence. Ethnicity was determined by their social networks and primary relationships, recreational and food preferences, most admired role models, religious affiliation, facility in Spanish, attitudes about Mexican and Anglo cultures, dress style, self-identification and expressed values, and display of ethnically-oriented political buttons. Findings suggested that economic factors influenced the manner in which identity was expressed, but did not bear a simple, direct correlation with the strength of an individual's ethnic identity. (NQ)

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Economic Success and Ethnicity:

Mexican-Americans in San Jose

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Economic Success and Ethnicity:
Mexican-Americans in San Jose

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Abstract

Both laymen and scholars in the United States have assumed that the maintenance of ethnic ties[1] is basically incompatible with economic success. The economic absorption of migrant groups has been considered one of the most powerful precipitators of complete assimilation to Anglo-American culture[2] (Graves 1966· Weppner 1968, 1971). To test this generalization, two economically contrasting groups of Mexican-Americans were studied over a one-year period in San Jose, California (Reynolds 1974).[3]

The results of the study suggest that economic factors influence the manner in which identity is expressed, but do not bear a simple, direct correlation with the strength of an individual's ethnic identity. The ten most economically successful informants who comprise the focus of this paper exhibited either an "assimilationist" or a "bicultural" adaptation to their dual ethnic identity. Informants' life stories, their attitudes toward Anglos, and their personal values and goals helped explain which adaptive style they were grouped into. Informants displayed an ethnic identity most consistently and intensely in their primary social networks, and none of the informants expressed or displayed a consistent commitment to full assimilation.

Description of the Study

The goals of the study were to discover the degree to which economic success was associated with loss of ethnicity in a small segment of an urban Mexican-American population, and to identify the adaptive strategies[4] used by these Mexican-American individuals living in an Anglo-American social and cultural context.

By working briefly in several Mexican-American community organizations in San Jose, I located a group suitable for study in a federally funded community development project in the downtown area. Ten Mexican-American administrators in this organization formed the sample of individuals for my study who were economically successful and well integrated into the American economic system. Their "target population" - the individuals for whom their program had been designed and funded - were economically at the opposite extreme. My informants in this latter group were twenty-four "students" enrolled in job rehabilitation classes sponsored and run by the community organization.

This paper will focus on the ethnicity patterns and adaptive strategies of the ten staff members. Staff members ranged in occupational position from secretary to chief program administrator. They ranged in age from 25 to 50, most had histories of stable employment, and the majority were second-generation U. S. born. They differed in the degree of their economic self-sufficiency; their salaries ranged from $6000/year to $20,000/year; none was receiving welfare. Most of the staff members originated from lower-class agricultural families.

These ten informants are a selected sample in that they were all working in the same organization, one whose function it was to improve economic conditions for Mexican-Americans. Because of the small size and the occupational bias of the sample, the findings of this study may not be applicable to other occupational categories, including Mexican-Americans who are at a significantly higher economic level. The occupational orientation of the staff did not necessarily indicate a preference for socializing with fellow Mexican-Americans, nor was it necessarily associated with political militancy. While they did work in an organization which served a Mexican-American population, they were hired in part because they were highly acculturated. Except for two of the secretaries, the primary task of the staff was to seek out and interact with potentially useful persons in the Anglo business community, and to encourage Anglo employers to hire more Mexican-Americans. Staff members were hired on the basis of how well and easily they formed working and social ties with Anglos, and how comfortable and familiar they were with the norms and habits of Anglo-American society.

Methodology

Most of the research time was spent participating in job-rehabilitation classes, observing staff members during working hours, and socializing with both staff and students during lunch hours. During the year a formal four-hour interview was conducted with each informant. Life histories were also collected from each individual. The interviews were divided into three main topics:

a) family background and basic census information; b) economic and occupational success and satisfaction; and c) ethnicity.

Degree of economic success was determined by combining a variety of measures, including the level of an informant's occupational skills, present salary, and present status within the organization. Also included in the informants' ratings were the degree of job stability demonstrated in the last year, the degree of expressed job satisfaction, and the degree of economic independence. Finally, informants were ranked according to their level of economic success.

Under the heading of ethnicity, informants responded to a variety of questions about their social networks and primary relationships, recreational and food preferences, most admired role models, religious affiliation, facility in Spanish, and their feelings about Mexican and Anglo cultures, Chicanismo,[5] Anglos, and their own ethnic identities. In addition, in the course of their daily work, informants were observed and scored for the extent to which they displayed external symbols of ethnicity such as use of Spanish, distinctly Mexican or Latin dress, or ethnically-oriented political buttons.[6] Informants' responses in each of these categories were scored and condensed into an Ethnicity Scale. Scores on the Ethnicity Scale were then translated into a rank ordering of informants. The number and strength of specifically ethnic components in an informant's social networks, dress style, language behavior, religious

affiliation, self-identification and expressed values, preferences, and opinions, indicated the strength of that individual's ethnic identity .

An informant with a strong ethnic identity would be one who, for example, spent most of his leisure time with fellow Mexican-Americans, was married to a Mexican-American, ate primarily Mexican food, sought out recreational activities, music, movies and books that were distinctly Mexican or Mexican-American in character, who spoke Spanish and was actively teaching his children Spanish, who tended to name Mexicans or Mexican-Americans as most admired figures, practiced Catholicism, was knowledgeable about Mexican or Mexican-American culture and history, and expressed positive feelings about Mexican ethnicity and opposed the idea of complete assimilation to Anglo-American culture. Finally, the economic rank and Ethnicity Scale rank of each informant was correlated,[7] indicating the degree of relationship between the two. Interview and observational data were used to interpret the correlations and to identify the adaptive styles exhibited by the informants.

Results: Staff Ethnicity Patterns

The significant finding for this study was that staff members' economic rankings did not correlate consistently with their ethnicity scores. Staff members varied from each other in the degree of economic self-sufficiency, in salary and job status, and in their occupational satisfaction. The strength of a staff

member's ethnic identity, however, could not be predicted from his economic standing. Equally striking was the finding that despite the high level of economic and social integration into Anglo-American society of staff members as a whole, staff members generally demonstrated strong ethnic ties in some major area of their lives.

Table I below shows the relationship between informants' economic rank (A=highest economic status, J-lowest) and their Ethnicity Scale ranks (1=lowest level of ethnic identity, 10= highest).

Table I. Occupational Rank and Ethnicity Scale Rank of Each Informant

Informant	Ethnicity Scale Rank
A	3
B	4
C	1
D	6
E	8
F	4
G	10
H	1
I	6
J	9

The informant ranking second occupationally ranks fourth on the Ethnicity Scale, indicating that he maintains a moderate number

of ethnic ties despite his high occupational status. The informants ranking fourth and fifth occupationally, rank sixth and eighth on the Ethnicity Scale, indicating that they display a high degree of ethnicity despite their relatively high standing economically. Informant H, who ranks third from the bottom economically, ranks first on the Ethnicity Scale, indicating a strong tendency toward assimilation despite her relatively low economic rank.

Another way to diagram the relationship between ethnicity and economic ranking is seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

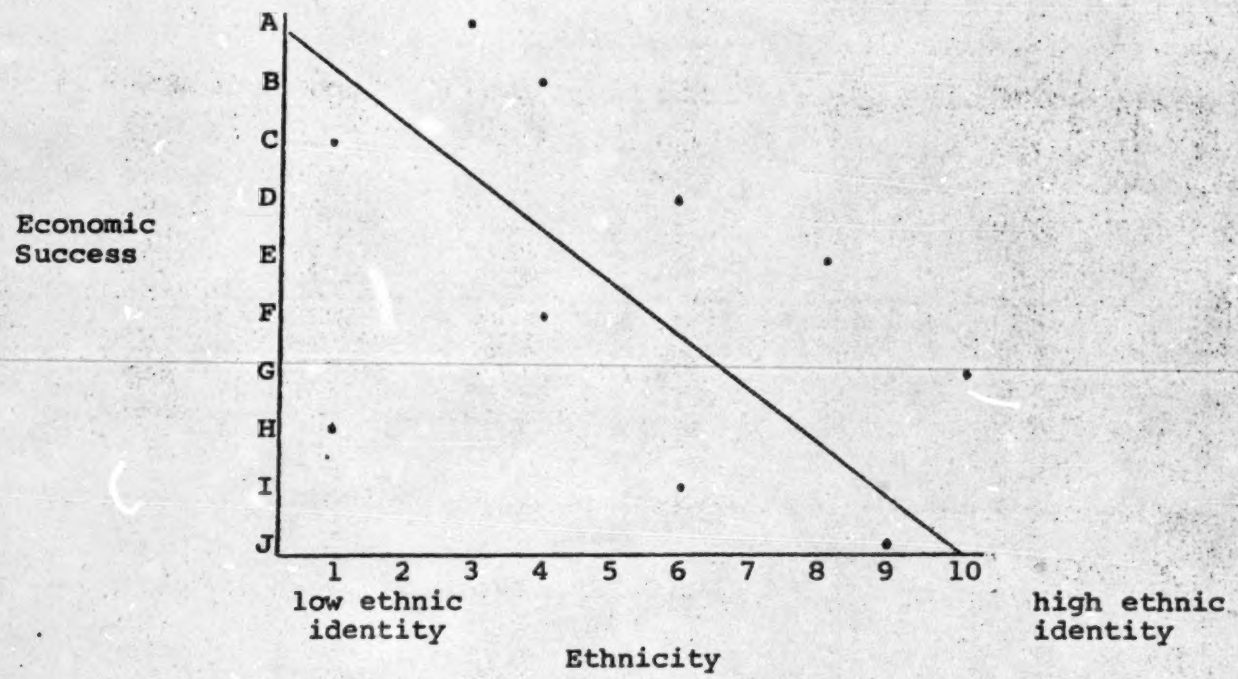

Figure 2. Graphic presentation of informants along variables of economic success and ethnicity.

Here the position of informants is compared to an idealized 1:1 positive correlation between high economic position and high assimilation (or low ethnic identity). As the diagram demonstrates, the three most economically successful informants (A,B,C) were among the five staff members who scored the lowest in ethnic identity. The next two most economically successful informants, however, express relatively strong ethnic identity. The next five informants (F through J) are widely scattered in their ethnicity rankings, with three of the five scoring sixth or above in strength of ethnic identity.

At a superficial behavioral level most staff members seemed highly acculturated, if not assimilated, to Anglo-American culture. Their style of dress did not distinguish them from Anglos. All spoke English better than they spoke Spanish. A few staff members spoke almost no Spanish. The staff members unanimously expressed strong loyalty to the U. S. and a clear North American national identity. One staff member expressed his feelings for this country in the following way:

> I'm an American of Mexican heritage. I put my life on the line for my country. The Mexican flag doesn't do a thing for me. I didn't fight for it...Old Glory is my flag.

Staff members as a group also showed a movement toward Anglo norms (or conversely, a weakening of traditional Mexican norms) in religious affiliation. There were only two practicing Catholics in the group.

Although staff members seemed superficially to exemplify a

positive correlation between economic success and cultural assimilation, even in those areas of life in which staff members seemed most fully acculturated their assimilation to Anglo norms was incomplete. For example, although the staff as a whole spoke English better than Spanish, most were making efforts to teach Spanish to their children. Similarly, there was a constant shifting from English to Spanish and back to English during informal office conversations. Although ethnicity did not determine staff members' choices of food, recreational activities and role models, ethnic elements were evident in about half of informant's choices in these areas. As an example, several staff members said they admired the Kennedy brothers, but did so specifically because of their efforts on behalf of the Mexican-American people in this country.

Where ethnicity seemed to have the strongest influence on behavior was in the staff members' choices of primary social and emotional ties. The fact that these informants chose their closest personal relationships among fellow Mexican-Americans is especially significant considering the extensive amount of professional and social contact staff members had with Anglos on a daily basis. The main task of over half these informants was to seek out and interact with influential Anglos in San Jose and act as bargainers and advocates for the economic and social needs of local Mexican-Americans. In general, staff members estimated that most of their professional contacts and most of their informal social contacts were with Anglos rather than

Chicanos. In addition, staff members' life histories revealed years of close, if not intimate, interaction with Anglos in school and in the Armed Forces. Despite a high rate of interaction with Anglos and histories of Anglo friendships, staff members showed a clear preference for Mexican-American best friends and marital partners. Half reported a preference for socializing with Mexican-Americans on a casual basis also. Informants' emotional and psychological ties to their ethnic background also became evident in discussions of basic life values and goals. One staff member who appeared to be one of the most highly acculturated in dress, language, and social network and who was the only staff member married to an Anglo, was at the same time one of the most critical of Anglo-American culture and strongly oriented to (his interpretation of) traditional Mexican culture.

> I see tremendous failures in this country. There's too much compromising...the American way of life is too pragmatic and money oriented...So I've acculturated economically but I haven't really acculturated all the way.. Mexico is more people-oriented. The door is always open to anybody...people just stop by... It's a beautiful part of relating with people.

This same informant was actively involved in increasing the "cultural awareness" of both Anglos and Mexican-Americans by participating in groups such as the Fine Arts Commission and in the Mexican-American Cultural Foundation. Only two staff members seemed to be striving to divest themselves of their ethnicity and assimilate completely to Anglo-American culture.

Even in these two cases the informants showed ambivalence about losing all traces of their ethnic identity.

Interpretations

Most writers in the field of acculturation in this country have been assimilated Anglos, and thus have been members of the host culture rather than members of an adapting culture. Partly for this reason, we have assumed that total assimilation to Anglo-American culture was inevitable, and our primary interest has been to discover the variables which either accelerate or retard this "inevitable" process. Only recently have we begun to actively investigate the idea that complete assimilation may be neither inevitable nor desirable, and to realize that the perceptions and goals of the assimilating individual play a determining role in the acculturation process. In this particular study, the informants discussed the personal conflicts and ambiguities they faced as members of a visible minority. Taken together, these statements help to explain why staff members appeared assimilated in certain areas of their lives, while they remained ethnically oriented in others. They illustrate why economic success, taken alone, was an inadequate predictor of assimilation, and how personal goals and perceptions influenced patterns of acculturation in this population.

Although the sample is small, and although the informants were occupationally involved in the social betterment of Mexican-Americans, none of the staff members felt their ethnic ties

resulted from political militancy. In fact, as has been mentioned, the staff members were patriotic and nationalistic as a group. None of the staff members said they associated with Mexican-Americans in order to strengthen or reaffirm their ethnicity. As important as their ethnic background was to most of them, informants preferred not to be perceived primarily in terms of their ethnicity.

Instead, staff members seemed to feel that for various reasons, both internal and external to themselves, full assimilation to Anglo-American culture was not a realistic and viable alternative for them. The following is a summary of three major conflicts experienced by informants which help to explain why complete assimilation was viewed as either impossible or unattractive to staff members:

1. The conflict between informants' national identity vs. how they felt they were labeled and perceived by other Americans.

   > "There's no doubt in my mind that I'm an American. On the other hand, I know the tendency is for most Anglos to look at me and notice I'm different."

2. The conflict between a desire for the material and educational benefits that assimilation might bring vs. the dangers of "selling out" - such as destruction of kinship ties, loss of self-esteem, and potential rejection by Anglos.

3. The conflict between a desire to escape ethnic labels altogether vs. the desire to be totally accepted, ethnic heritage and all.

Staff members thus saw themselves caught in a situation in which material goals frequently conflicted with their desires

for acceptance and self-esteem. Staff members also perceived a discrepancy between their perceptions of themselves and what they felt were the perceptions of Anglo-Americans around them. They felt an attraction to many elements of their ethnic background while realizing that their ethnicity was sometimes a source of pain. Finally, staff members were torn between wanting to be accepted for what they in fact were (both Mexican and American), and their desire to escape an ethnic label altogether. One informant expressed this feeling in the following way.

> I'm a Mexican-American because of my family ties. I am involved too, though, so in that sense I'm a Chicano...I'd like to feel that I'm just_____ (his own name). That's what we're all fighting for.

Besides these problems and risks, two other factors seemed to discourage complete assimilation, even among staff members at the highest economic level in this group. First, complete assimilation was not essential to the attainment of a relatively high degree of economic success and social recognition. Secondly, informants were discouraged from complete assimilation by their experiences and observations of Anglo-American society: an assimilated Mexican-American is still labeled as ethnically different from an Anglo-American and thus potentially is still a target for anti-Mexican prejudice and stereotyping.

Informants achieved many of their educational and material goals by participating in and (to varying extents) identifying with Anglo-American society. Realization of interpersonal needs,

however, seemed more easily fulfilled in the context of close relationships with other Mexican-Americans. In other words, although most of the staff members reported they could get along as well with Latins and Anglos, and had an equal number of friends in each group, their closest emotional relationships were not with Anglos and they reported overall a greater ease of interaction among fellow Mexican-Americans.

In part they attributed this greater rapport to the fact that they had more in common with people of a Latin background. Even more important, however, was their experience with Anglo prejudice (whether on a personal or institutional level) which had made them feel uncomfortable to varying degrees in all-Anglo contexts:

> I always recognized a certain feeling of superiority among Anglos, but I told myself I was an exception. I was a good Mexican...When I got out (of the Service) I started seeing subtle forms of discrimination.

Another informant described her disillusionment after high school:

> In highschool I had about three Anglo friends. I got along with them fairly well, but sometimes their parents seemed kind of uneasy...Sometimes when I'm in a store with all Anglos I feel resentful that no Mexicans have been hired...I was very rebellious in my own way when I got out of Catholic School where everyone is supposed to be equal and God loves everyone, and I found out the world wasn't like that.

In fact, it was precisely in a Mexican-American context that staff members said they could most successfully escape ethnic

labels and stereotypes. The promise of the melting pot - that one could become an integral part of an ethnically mixed group while retaining one's individuality - could not be achieved by these informants in the Anglo-American "pot". In an Anglo context their Mexican ethnicity was a potential stigma, which often prevented comfortable interaction and made them feel they were locked into a stereotyped category. With fellow Mexican-Americans, informants felt they were more frequently being judged and perceived as individuals, and they did not have to break through an ethnic stereotype before achieving a sense of person-to-person contact.

Up to this point staff members have been discussed as a single group, and variations between members of the group have not been emphasized. Although these informants independently made similar statements about the problems they faced as a visible minority, three of the staff members differed from the other seven in their responses to these conflicts. Seven of the informants seemed to be following what might be called a "bicultural" strategy. Individuals using this strategy integrated an American national identity with a Mexican ethnic identity and sought rewards and benefits from both reference groups. For example, several informants attempted to compensate for a perceived lack of recognition and status among Anglos by involving themselves in Mexican-American organizations which reinforced their pride in their Mexican heritage. Another informant integrated both aspects of her identity in a more

individualistic and personal way:

> From my Mexican side I get the pride which keeps me going, the respect for people, and for religion. From my American side I get my freedom, the right to say what I want. I've gotten a lot from both of them.

Another possible response to the threat of social rejection is to attempt to meet society's standards, to eliminate the differences that are the sources of social disapproval and social inequality. The three staff members who ranked lowest on the Ethnicity Scale seemed to have adopted this "assimilationist" approach. Unlike other staff members, these informants said they would not be bothered if no one ever knew they were Mexican-American. They had a greater number of close personal ties with Anglos than the other staff members, and said they had been accused by fellow-Mexican-Americans of having sold out, of being "coconuts". (They had, by the way, also been accused of being trouble makers by some Anglos, an indication that their strategy was satisfying neither Anglos nor fellow Mexican-Americans.) They differed from other staff members in that they reported making no conscious efforts to maintain a Mexican cultural tradition, to display their ethnic background, or to differentiate themselves from Anglos. They were also the least critical of Anglo-American society. When asked what advantages, if any, she saw in her Mexican origins, one of these informants replied, "I'm afraid you got me there. Can we go on to something else?" The same informant spoke of feeling terrified in the

company of large numbers of Mexican-Americans.

Unless society accords fairly consistent admiration or prestige for being different, a person can hardly be expected to feel completely and consistently proud of his differentness Even informants who said they had made peace with their dual identities had done so by individually battling against social stereotypes and recurring discrimination. The bicultural adaptation seemed to be proving generally successful for the informants who had adopted it. The seven bicultural individuals had managed to achieve for themselves not only stable employment, but the opportunity to express their opinions on social issues and to exert some influence on social welfare policies. They were able to interact both casually and professionally in Anglo-American society, and their sense of American national identity was firm. Even these individuals, however, were engaged in a perpetual struggle to balance their material and professional goals, their desire for self-esteem, and their desire for approval from both Anglos and fellow Chicanos.

The degree to which self-esteem had been gained or lost by assimilationist staff members is not clear from this study, although all informants indicated that their self-esteem was maintained with considerable personal effort. Positive self-esteem is probably always threatened when an individual must struggle to develop and maintain it in opposition to much of what his society tells him about himself.

Conclusions

In the process of participating in Anglo-dominated occupational and social networks, the informants in this study personally confronted major barriers to full assimilation. Some of the barriers seemed inherent in the economic and social structure of the larger society. One informant, for example, stated that because of his lack of formal educational credentials, he had been unable to attain the occupational level in the scientific community for which his actual occupational experience had prepared him. On the other hand, he had difficulty finding lower-level positions because his experience in laboratories made him "overqualified" according to some employers.

Perhaps the strongest psychological barrier to assimilation was the informants' inability (or unwillingness) to risk the loss of self-esteem and primary group ties which is implied in a total psychological identification with Anglo-American society and culture. Informants felt they had encountered a no-win situation in which they were being asked to disavow their own heritage psychologically and behaviorally, and then to risk that Anglos would still judge and perceive them in terms of their ethnic background.

Perhaps what emerges most clearly from this study are the complex and conflicting realities which can be experienced by individuals with a dual identity. As the informants show, a person can be committed to economic and educational success

and strive to be accepted as an undifferentiated member of Anglo-American society, while at the same time perceiving that society is limited in its ability to incorporate him, and while being both ambivalent and uncertain about the implications of full assimilation. Assimilation is discouraged in part by the present social structure of our society, but perhaps more fundamentally by the individual's unwillingness or inability to destroy a portion of himself. Rather than attempt full assimilation and risk rejection (by either Anglos or fellow ethnics) and loss of self-esteem, most informants retained some ethnic ties and cultivated primary social networks in which they felt accepted as individual human beings.

Notes

1. "Ethnic ties" is used here to mean cultural and linguistic ties with a group other than Anglo-Saxon or Northern European.
2. The phrase "Anglo-American culture" refers to the core values and social attributes of the American middle class white majority. Although this is a heterogeneous group when described at a specific level (some are Catholic, some are Protestant, for example), one can identify major characteristics of this group which distinguish them from the lower socio-economic class and from peoples of color in the U. S. See M. Arensberg (1971) and F. Hsu (1971) for descriptions of American middle class culture.
3. The research was begun in September 1971 and was completed in December 1972.
4. For a discussion and exemplification of the concept of adaptive strategy, see Spindler, George and Louise Spindler (1971) Pp 1-18.
5. "Chicanismo" refers to the politically-oriented activism and awareness of Mexican-Americans. Among my informants, the official definition of a Chicano was a politically aware and involved Mexican-American. A Mexican-American was simply a person of Mexican heritage. The older staff members tended to use "Mexican-American" when referring to themselves because "Chicano" was a more recent label they were unaccustomed to using, not because they saw themselves as uninvolved politically.

6. Much of the initial fieldwork involved discovering what dress or hair style was considered by informants to constitute an expression of ethnicity.
7. Kendall's statistic (Hollander and Wolfe 1973) was applied on the two rank scores (economic rank and Ethnicity Scale rank) to confirm the independence of these two measures.

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